

Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater: Victorian Aestheticism, Doubt, and Secularisation by Sara Lyons. London: Legenda, 2015. 291 pp. ISBN 978-1-909662-48-3. £55; \$99.

Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater makes a valuable contribution to Pre-Raphaelite studies. Carefully written and well argued, it fulfills the function of the best kind of criticism by stimulating discussion and inviting fresh exploration and debate. Sara Lyons evaluates concepts that are too often used imprecisely in the worn currency of criticism. Two notable examples come to mind in writing on Pater: the definition of aestheticism as a “religion of art” and the view that Pater was an agnostic who was increasingly sympathetic, in later life, to Christianity.

In the Introduction, the author deftly moves readers to a recognition of the complex issues and questions that terms like a “religion of art” involve. As she remarks, treating aestheticism as an episode in the history of secularization raises as many questions as it purports to answer and “frustrates any simple plotting.” One obvious point is that the aesthetes’ religion of beauty was often a path towards an acceptance of the beauty of religion. This fact manifested in the lives of notable 1890s converts to Catholicism. One of these, Pater’s friend Lionel Johnson, saw no contradiction between the aesthetic and the religious consciousness. In his well-known poem, the soul of King Charles “was of the saints; And art to him was joy” (“By the Statue of King Charles at Charing Cross”).

Lyons seeks to answer an important question: By what acts of differentiation did Victorian secularization seek to make itself independent from religious faith and to establish itself as a separate entity? In trying to answer this question she encourages readers to look afresh at Victorian secularization and to realize its complexity. In her view, the “melancholy, long, withdrawing roar” of waning faith spoke in many sounds. Secularization talked with different accents and exhibited diverging impulses. Some Victorian agnostics, such as John Morley, sought to affirm their social conformity and strict respectability in order to render their unbelief more acceptable. For others, like Algernon Swinburne, the position of those who, in G.K. Chesterton’s words, “do not have the faith, / And will not have the fun,” was pointless and incomprehensible (“The Song of the Strange Ascetic”). For Swinburne, the end of Faith was the coming of Joy, an opportunity to affirm that life which had grown grey with the breath of the pale Galilean. For them, secularization meant revelling in the sensual and earthly in what, effectively, would be a return to paganism.

In an interesting turn, Lyons aligns Swinburne with Pater. In spite of their obvious differences in temperament, in personality, in literary style, in the re-